



**DIVERSITY LEADERSHIP:**  
*Sponsoring Our Future Leaders*  
By: Commander John Imahori



As a senior officer within the Coast Guard and a first generation Asian American I am proud to be part of the current leadership initiatives that promote diversity within our maritime service. As our nation changes so too must the Coast Guard, so that we continue to represent those people we protect.

An inclusive workforce is not just a moral imperative but it is now an organizational mandate. At the forefront of our hierarchy is guidance from the Executive Branch where in 2009 President Obama issued an Executive Order, Increasing Participation of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the Federal Programs to create a framework for Diversity Management in the Federal Government. This foundational document structured an initiative whose purpose was to “improve the quality of life and opportunities for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders through increased access to, and participation in, Federal programs in which they may be served.” Not only did this presidential proclamation provide goals for greater diversity but it also provided for regular monitoring of results and coordination of partnerships between federal agencies, other public and private sector collaborations, and community involvement.

Likewise and aligning with the Whitehouse, the Coast Guard formulated their own strategic guidance on expanding organizational diversity. Our published Diversity Strategic Plan offered a key stone to ensure that our members would have the opportunity to prosper and contribute to all our assigned missions. Within this core document its tasked leaders at all levels to get involved with affinity groups to maximize opportunities for developing and maintaining executive outreach partnerships. Furthermore, it set clear objectives that our organization provide equitable opportunities based on performance, so that every member could have the potential to compete. These goals directly ensured the sustainment of the Coast Guard’s values by ensuring that each individual would be able to contribute within our organization.

However opaque challenges lay ahead which may impede progress. Recently the Washington Post put a name to organizational inertia that limited the progression of diversity. In the article “The new power move”, writer Brigid Schultz spoke about the difference between mentoring and sponsoring and how current methods of sponsoring were adversely impacting upper level diversity. First she differentiated between two forms of subordinate engagement. One being mentoring, offering advice whereas the other was were sponsoring, a person in power who eased a workers assent by eliminating obstacles and provided a high profile work assignment. Unfortunately it was her hypothesis that sponsorship lead to unconscious bias which led to a glass ceiling for those categories not currently in power.

But regardless of these social challenges diversity and inclusion are well within our organizational reach but will require hard work and tenacity from all of us. Diversity leadership courage can be extracted from history. The Reverend Martin Luther King recognized social inertia and the effort required to overcome it. He stated that “Human progress was neither automatic nor inevitable” and that every step required “tireless exertion...of dedicated individuals”. Additionally he further tasked those disenfranchised

to “straighten our backs and work for our freedom” defining them not as victims but rather as agents of peaceful change.

Finally, it is not solely an organization’s responsibility but also the member’s onus to seek out professional growth opportunities. There are innumerable organizations that offer affinity assistance in and out of the Coast Guard to help pull down walls that impede professional progress. One such organization is Asian American Government Executive Network (AAGEN) which works to promote, expand and support Asian American and Pacific Islander leadership in Government. Specifically this organization works to explore the possibilities of setting a more structured network, and to find ways to identify other executives. Through their work AAGEN establishes a high level voice and representation for Asian Americans in Federal service, to help each other, and to maintain visibility. But this is just one affinity group among innumerable other groups, each with its own unique flavor.

Our Commandant states it best for our organization. “The intensity of our leadership commitment remains vital to the success of our diversity management effort”. Utilizing this guidance it is clear that through our good and effective leadership we will continue to take care of our people and maintain our world class status.

**Leadership competencies addressed:** *Take care of our people; Diversity Management; Partnering and Mentoring.*